

Special ed seeks lives of dignity for all

KU's Department of Special Education had a lot to celebrate this past year: its 50th anniversary and a number-one national ranking among all special education graduate programs, including public and private universities.

Come with me to the fifth floor of Joseph R. Pearson Hall on a typical day, and you'll meet Becky Saathoff — scanning, copying or shredding documents, delivering mail and recycling. Becky works primarily for our department's Transition Coalition, nationally known for its training and services to support the transition needs of adolescents and young adults with disabilities.

Becky has a superb work ethic, an infectious smile, a winning attitude and cognitive disability. She also participates in community functions, recreation programs and volunteer efforts. Becky enjoys earning and spending her own money — especially on shoes in her favorite color (that would be green) and participating in various Special Olympics sports (she's a silver medalist in swimming). She lives with her parents but dreams of the day she'll be ready for her own apartment. To prepare, she works regularly with coaches who help her hone her vocational and independent living skills.

Less than 40 years ago, Becky's life would have been very different. Vocational education and community support programs for adolescents and adults with disabilities were almost nonexistent. After leaving public school, most of these adults lived isolated lives at home or in institutions — with little to do and few opportunities to learn and grow.



STEVE PUPPE

Thanks to the ongoing advocacy efforts of countless parents, researchers, teachers and other concerned citizens, services have improved dramatically. Many changes that help adults with disabilities lead productive, satisfying lives have been influenced by the groundbreaking research of our department faculty. As far back as the 1950s, Dick Schiefelbusch worked with Kansas colleagues to develop instructional methods that showed students with disabilities could learn.

Donors have made a huge difference in our ability to prepare the next generation of special education teachers, teacher educators, disability researchers and administrative leaders. With gifts from friends who share our commitment, we achieve goals that ensure better academic, social and vocational learning opportunities.

For example, KU's Beach Center on Disability was created through a gift from Marianna and Ross Beach. This family-focused center provides online support for people with disabilities,

their families and professionals around the world. A recently endowed professorship, established by Del and Barbara Williamson, will support the ongoing research of a nationally renowned special education faculty member. Scholarship funds, like one launched last spring established in memory of Prof. Gordon Alley, help our top graduate students do their best work.

Every check or online gift from donors like you enables us to create new learning opportunities that help people everywhere. There are more Beckys out there. Help us reach them.

Chris Walther-Thomas

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